



WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE A BRIEF ANALYTICAL SURVEY

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INTRODUCTION

Why language evolved can easily be fathomed but the when and the how still remain debatable and mysterious. Kathryn Thornton opines, "Language leaves behind no fossils and could not be recorded until the advent of writing, some 5,000 years ago. However, it seems reasonable to assume that language evolved along with early modern humans at least 100,000 years ago". Concerning literature Raymond Williams is of the opinion that it is of comparatively recent origin which refers to "any written, printed matter on any subject". One is not entering into a serious discussion on the aptness and inaptness, adequacy or inadequacy of what Williams hold. However, one is bound to engage into its demarcation for under its umbrella fall "plays, essays, novels, poetry, and short stories". In this essay, the concern is not the origin and development of language and literature as such but to consider how it has shaped the human history. Secondly, English did not originate in India; it came with the British. For the moment, therefore, one's concern is not its arrival in India which is a subject of discussion in itself but rather women's contribution towards it in Indian English literature. Again, one is not interested to find out how women figure in it but rather how they involve themselves in it. Initially, it looked as though men had the foothold over language and literature but history bears witness to the fact that women do not lag too behind. Women may not have contributed as much as men have contributed not necessarily because of being 'inferior' but because of the lack of opportunity available to them. Now that there is attitudinal change practically in every sphere, one observes women's contribution in every field.

1.1 Relation between language and literature

English as a language and literature are two distinct entities inseparably connected with each other. One cannot make much sense without the other as B. P. Roy quotes Georges Bataille who argues, "Literature is either essential or nothing". The relation between the two can be fathomed as Kalyannath Dutta maintains, "The language that is found to precede literature everywhere, no doubt, makes the latter. Yet, literature, a formidable one in particular, cultivates and develops and even sponsors a language. In fact the language and the literature are complementary to each other. A great literature comes out of a great language and vice versa". Amiya Bhushan Sharma presents another prerequisite, as it were, of language as he holds, "Reading of literature becomes more enjoyable and thought provoking when you have a knowledge of the society and the major social events of the period at the back of your mind". Keeping these aspects in mind, this article will delve deep into a territory that has become popular thanks to many women writers in the post independent era.

1.1.1 Indian English literature

Atanu Bhattacharya asks a very pertinent question, "What constitutes 'Indian English'? Is it a mere conglomeration of certain grammatical, semantic, lexical and morphological features that govern its use; or is it a channel that opens out to a newer world—a world that entices the learner as well as the user with promises of greater prestige and power"? Yet another question resounds is what is the 'Indianness' in Indian English? Is it the lexical structure, syntax and morphology inherent which may result in collocational and/or grammatical deviations or the tendency towards translation and shift that it entails? Whatever may be the leitmotif, the study shows that more than eighty million people in India use English as medium of communication, an estimate which far supersedes the speakers of English even in Great Britain, the place of its origin. Notable still is that in India there are nineteen other national languages besides a thousand or more dialects. Here in this milieu that Indian English literature is being discussed about. What makes English such a widely-spoken language in India? What are the *a priori* historical principles latent such as its arrival, its spread, its disseminative principles, the education policies, the language politics, the hierarchies of power inherent in a language, and the position of the learner/user vis-a-vis the power-language are some of the pertinent questions that English can be homogeneously termed Indian English?

English is perhaps the only language that can be called a world language spread in all continents, except in South America, spoken by more than three hundred million people. There may not be any other language either that has undergone through so numerous a transformation within the country of its origin as well as outside of it. Every time English intermingled with another language, it gave rise

to new Englishes, new identities, new nations, new literatures and an innovative window to look upon the world. Atanu Bhattacharya is very positive in his outlook, "The influence of English cannot be denied in any sphere of our life: it is the prestige language, the language of global access, the language that conducts the affair of the world. We, however, must be aware of the fact that the English that we use is our own English and not the language that the once-rulers imposed upon us. It is reworked English and not the English of our colonial masters".

1.1.2 Spread and rise of English in India

The Indian Education Commission formed in 1882 seemed to have given rather cold shoulder in that it did not make any recommendation to help the study of modern Indian languages or reduce the dominance of English. As a result, English brought about drastic changes in Indian linguistic condition than expected. It assumed the role and functions of several national languages. English was spoken by the elite class whereas the common folk spoke vernacular. It does not stop there, for higher education it recognized the extension of European knowledge through the medium of English. Very subtly therefore a way was being prepared to begin the study of English even earlier than was the case. There arose a debate to determine whether or not the mastery over modern Indian languages should be given the priority before beginning the study of English. The Government Resolution on Education Policy in 1904 opted for the former; English not being recommended for study at the primary level.

Despite the persistent attempts to make modern Indian languages popular, the medium of instruction still remained English especially at the higher levels of education and the craze for English continued to spread without any obstruction even at the expense of dominating and thus subduing the Indian education scene. Adding fuel to the fire, the national freedom movement in India had its effect on the growth of education and English in India. Surprisingly, a movement that favoured a standpoint to oust the British from the country, was itself divided over the question of English in India. Lala Lajpat Rai argued that in order to acquaint with the modern sciences, the modern European languages and literatures were a prerequisite. Here in this sense, Lala Lajpat Rai would belong to the tradition of Raja Rammohan Roy. Mahatma Gandhi however, vehemently protested arguing the dominance of English over the vernaculars was unnatural especially its use as the medium of instruction at the earliest age possible. Bhattacharya quotes Gandhi, "I want the culture of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any... But I would not have a single Indian to forget, neglect or be ashamed of his mother-tongue or to feel that he or she cannot think or express the best thought in his or her own vernacular". Later, when India eventually obtained freedom, the Constitution Fathers had made provision that:

(1) In our Constitution the Hindi language has been accepted as the official language of our country; (2) It has been stated in the Constitution that for 15 years from the inception of the Constitution i.e. from 1950, the English language will continue to remain the official language; after that Hindi will take its place; and efforts should be made for the improvement of the Hindi language so that it can take place of English and arrangements must be made for the teaching of Hindi all over India. Under such provision, the *three language formula* was passed in the Constitution but in the course of time, for some reason or the other, English gained prominence and now as Karunakar Jha observes, "The growing popularity of English in India shows that people aspire to reach beyond provincial limits. Literature is to language what flesh and blood is to the human body".

Karunakar Jha's observation apart, this can also be said with the epistemological certitude that though under British Rule for nearly two full centuries, nevertheless, the people of the country maintained the zest and passion for the literature. In fact, the very struggle for freedom was first expressed through pen rather than the sword. Apprehension and paradox apart, it is now a matter of pleasure and fulfillment that Indian English Literature has been growing rapidly both in quantity and quality. The signs are perceptible as many Indian writers in English have acquired the prestigious literary awards like Booker Prize, Commonwealth Fiction Prize and Sahitya Academy Prizes, which plainly indicate the achievement of Indian English writers, both men and women. There is no monopoly of men in this regard; women too have matched men, if not surpassed, in literary field.

1.2 Pioneer women contributors to Indian English literature

During the contemporary period there have been hosts of women writers who have mesmerized the literary world (of Indian English literature) with their vivid, realistic and creative imaginations. Fifty years ago or so, the Indian English literature did not include many names as it does today. It is not to forget that there have been women who have paved the way for the present women. Names such as Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu must be remembered for their pioneering work. Toru Dutt lived just for twenty one years but the length or shortness of life did not defy her from achieving an international acclaim. More importantly, she put India into an international map of letters. At such a tender age of 21 to master French, English, Bengali and Sanskrit is no menial job. Those who knew her personally, perceiving her intellectual aptitude state that she was one of the most remarkable women that ever lived. Back in 1879, Sunday Review, extolling her unparalleled geniuses remarked, "If George Sand and George Eliot had died at the age of twenty one they would certainly have not left behind them any proof of application or originality superior to those bequeathed to us by Toru Dutt". Toru Dutt easily delved deep into the literatures of French and English, the two foreign languages in which she was educated. She interplayed the culture of her land with that of England and France because she had a fairly good knowledge of Vedas which reflect in her *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. She wrote poetry in English and prose in French with such an ease that James Darmesteter, the French writer and critic, whom Smita quotes, commented:

This daughter of Bengal, so admirably and so strangely gifted Hindu by race and tradition, an English woman by education, a French woman at heart, poet in English, prose-writer in French who at the age of eighteen made India acquainted with the poets of France in the rhyme of England, who blended in herself, three souls and three traditions, and died at the age of twenty one in the full bloom of her talent and on the eve of the awakening of her genius, presents in the history of literature, a phenomena without parallel".

Sarojini Naidu (Feb 13, 1879- Mar 2, 1949) was no less prolific either as her name figures in the topmost level of nationalists fighting against the British to secure independence of the country. As an indefatigable worker of the Indian National Congress and a political stalwart, her name may be mentioned along with that of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose and Maulana Azad. Her meeting with Mahatama Gandhi in 1914 in London changed her considerably; a poet in her receded gradually and a patriot and freedom fighter in her increased rapidly. Close to Gandhi and Nehru not only in principle and personal friendship but also in love of the country as she declares, "As long as I have life, as long as blood flows through this arm of mine, I shall not leave the cause of freedom. Come my general, come my soldiers, I am only a woman, only a poet. But as a woman I give to you the weapons of faith and courage and the shield of fortitude. And as a poet, I fling out the banner of song, and sound the bugle-call to battle. Thus shall I kindle the flame which shall waken you, men, from slavery".

1.2.1 Luminaries

On the world stage too there have been only a select few who could pioneer women's resistance movement such as, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Barbara Smith, Margaret Fuller, Simone de Beauvoir and the like. These women wrote movingly about the unequal access to education and the lack of alternatives availed to women who had marriage, motherhood and family to content with. Similarly, on Indian stage too, Toru Dutt and Sarojini paved the way for the others to shine. Among the luminaries, Kamla Das (Mar 31, 1934-Ma 31, 2009), born in Kerala to parents both of whom were poets, is worthy of mention. Insofar as she was born of parents who were poets it was natural that she would develop an instinct for poetry. So far so good; life was yet to take its turn on her. Life took a twist when she married at fifteen. Unfortunately, her marriage did not yield her much happiness. Born to poets, turned to be a poet herself; and the love that she lacked in married life well cures her writing, both poetry and prose. A prolific writer expressed her deep seated feeling for love both in prose and poetry, in English as well as in Malayalam receiving many awards for her work. She distinguished herself as an Indo-Anglican poet due to her extraordinary command over English. Her book, *My Story* (1975) which contains a sincere autobiography can be compared to that of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Smita Mishra writes, "With a frankness and openness unusual in the Indian context, Kamla Das expresses her need for love. What is overpowering about her poems is their sense of urgency. They literally boil over. With a slender corpus of poetry, she has secured prominent place among the immortals of literature".

Anita Mazumdar Desai was born on June 24, 1937 to a Bengali father and a German mother who for political reasons preferred to settle down in Delhi. Having a dual heritage both in terms of genitors and cultures, she inherited the analytical mind of her mother. Unsurprisingly, therefore, one will find her to be a great analyst of the human mind, a creator of brilliant characters and an astute interpreter of life. Niyazi and Ranjana hold that "The novels of Anita Desai are basically female oriented. She probes into their problems, be it of a mother, a daughter, a sister or a wife. She writes of the woman as a victim in a patriarchal, matrilineal and father-dominated Indian family. The various phases of Indian woman's life and her emotional reactions are captured by the novelist". Most of Desai's novel has existential psycho-analytical slant describing some or the other aspect of human life, such as, the problem of taste, the question of nature and origin of values. S. B. Bhambar writes, "Indian novelist and short story writer, Anita Desai is

especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. Several of Desai's novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of the middle-class women". Anita Singh opines, "Anita Desai's unquestionable existential concern has distinguished her from other novelists of the younger generation. She is the only novelist who shows some sort of similarity to Arun Joshi. But even Arun Joshi has yet to acquire the depth of Anita Desai. Committed to novel writing, she is very sincere and practical with her craft".

1.2.2 Postmodern writers

Taking note of emerging trends Birendra Sinha says, "Before the rise of novels, several women writers composed songs, short stories and small plays... Women writers have incorporated the recurring female experiences in their writings and it affected the cultural and language patterns of Indian literature. They have brought a stylized pattern in the whole context of Indian writing". In resonance with Birendra Sinha, Amar Nath Prasad resounds, "The postmodern Indian writing in English in fiction, drama and poetry is gaining ground and making a separate and independent entity of its own". Amar Nath observes that the Indian women not only have the feministic issues for their subject matter but also have courageously revolted against the tradition, their celebration of body, their constant search for the root and the individual identity and their sense of Indian-ness. He discovers, "The recent fictions after 1980 are flourishing more vigorously than the fictions before. In both, theme and style, feeling and form modern novels have heralded a new vision and thought. Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Khushwant Singh to name only a few, have given to the world some new things both thematically and stylistically".

Shashi Deshpande was the daughter of a renowned Kannada dramatist. She obtained a degree in economics and law but when shifted to Mumbai she was attracted to journalism. While working as a journalist she began writing short stories and gradually developed into a novelist. Birendra Sinha accounts, "Shashi Deshpande as an Indian English novelist stands apart, for she writes about certain specific concerns after her own manner. Her fiction with rare insights and finesse, bonds the author's relation with her work. She has continued to write with a definite faith seasoned with the desire to write". Scholars are divided about Shashi Deshpande's slant while others debate whether she is a feminist. But inasmuch as her writings are concerned, they deal with various feminists concerns like woman's place in marriage, her sexuality, the gender roles and fight against injustice that is inflicted on her. On being asked if she likes being called a feminist, she replies, "Yes, I would, I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simone de Beauvoir that "the fact we are human, is much more important than our being men and women." I think that is my idea of feminism".

Pravin also finds Shashi's feminist stance nourishing for the construction of healthy human society because she is not a radical western feminist who urgently demands abolition of differences in dress, demeanour, personal adornment, sexual initiative and the allocation of home making and parental duties etc. She is a very sober type of feminist in that her feminism is grounded on Indian tradition, wisdom and ideology inviting women and men towards creating a mature and balanced gender relationship. Like Pravin, S. K. Salahuddin too makes a very subtle remark about Deshpande commenting that she writes as a human being and not primarily as a man or a woman. That she does not hold on to a militant idea of feminism is clear as she opines that "There must not be any category or group on the basis of gender discrimination. She holds that literature has to be valued in the social context, but to apply the tag of feminist is one way, dismissing the serious concerns of the novel by labeling them, by calling the work propagandist". Salahuddin further comments that Shashi may not be a radical feminist; however, a woman finds a central role in her novels and short stories. He holds, "Shashi Deshpande's novels represent the contemporary modern women's struggle to define and attain an autonomous selfhood. Her female protagonists are at great pains to free themselves from stultifying traditional constraints. The social and cultural change in the post-Independence India has made the woman conscious of the need to define themselves, their place in the society, and their relationship with the surrounding".

It is regrettable that some prominent names and their work cannot be included due to lack of space here. However, this essay does not seem complete without mentioning the name of Arundhati Roy. R. K. Dhawan writes, "Born in Kerala and based in Delhi, 38 years old Arundhati Roy is the first entirely homegrown Indian to have the Booker Prize. Unlike most other popular Indian-English novelists, she was neither educated nor does she live abroad. Roy has been born, brought up and educated in India, and her writing style is intrinsically Indian. Her victory for a first time novelist is the culmination of a fairy tale". Roy seems to make headway from the basic assumption that the liberation of women necessitates the liberation of all human beings. Though sheer fiction, Roy picks up a living reality of men and women in close conjunction with the political reality that shapes the day-to-day lives of the people. Aijaz Ahmad is very objective and sincere in his remarks as he observes, "A key strength of Arundhati Roy is that she has written a novel that has learned all that there is to be learned from modernism, magic realism, cinematic cutting and montage and other such developments of narrative technique in the 20th century, but a novel that nevertheless remains Realist in all its essential features".

Roy is genius enough to assimilate all the ingredients required of a realist fiction: "Love, grief, remembrance, the absolute indispensability of verisimilitude in depiction of time, place and character, so exact that we know it to be fiction can nevertheless read it as the closest possible kin of fact. She succeeds so long as she is telling the tale of private life in the form of what is basically a miniaturized family saga". In this novel the predicament of Indian women is studied in depth along with the plight of *dalits* (untouchables), lower class people, racial subalterns vis-à-vis global capitalism and neo-imperialism masquerading as globalization. Roy sees the resistance against gender oppression to be leading towards, if not instigating, resistance against caste, class oppression and spurring on anti-colonial thought and action. Such variants of resistant rebellion are articulated through the examination of the marital and inter-gender relations of Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel. Transgressions of these characters, openly subversive or outside the boundaries of the institution of marriage as practiced in post-colonial India, and the "Love laws" that predate Western colonialism lead to a scathing interrogation of the basic values and structures of the post-colonial Indian society. Thus, Roy shows a way for the Indian women for resisting local as well as global inequalities. Amitabh Roy seems to have correctly comprehended the intent of Arundhati Roy as he observes, "One of the categories of "small things" Arundhati Roy cares for consists of women. There can be no gainsaying that despite all socio-economic developments during the last two centuries, women do not occupy an enviable position in society. It is relevant, therefore, to look into the causes that have kept them in subordination and relegated them to the status of the second sex".

CONCLUSION

One can ask the basic question: what and how much do the women contribute to Indian English literature? Having gone through the select few writers and their perspectives, one may agree that the women writers have taken into account practically every area of human life: social, economic, political, cultural and religious life of the people of all classes in the post-independent India. They have expressed them in the form of poetry, drama and novel. Toru Dutt interpreted to the West the spirit of India and all that India stands politically, culturally and religiously. Sarojini Naidu is a combination of a poetess as well as a freedom fighter. Her poetries reflect the close tie between the Hindus and Muslims on the one hand while on the other inspire patriotism in every Indian's heart. Kamla Das makes every couple realize the interconnection between love and sex. If availed both of these, how the couples and families prosper and when deprived of it what follows. Shashi Deshpande is very close to Kamla Das in that she deals with feminists concerns like woman's place in marriage, her sexuality, the gender roles and fight against injustice that is inflicted on her. She is a very sober type of feminist in that her feminism is grounded on Indian tradition, wisdom and ideology inviting women and men towards creating a mature and balanced gender relationship. She is of the opinion that there is a need to have a world which recognizes a place for all human beings. There is no superior and inferior and that human beings are two halves of one species. Arundhati Roy is genius enough to assimilate all the ingredients required of a realist fiction: love, grief, remembrance, the absolute indispensability of verisimilitude in depiction of time, place and character, so exact so as to know it to be fiction can nevertheless read it as the closest possible kin of fact. She succeeds so long as she is telling the tale of private life in the form of what is basically a miniaturized family saga. In other words, Indian English fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of contemporary Indian writing in English. It provides in sights, a wealth of understandings of reservoir of meanings and a basis of discussion. Through these writers' eyes one can see a different world. With their assistance one can realize the potential of human achievement. Many of the Indian women novelists focus on women issues. They have a woman's perspective on the world to ponder over.

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